

## What's Crazy Is That Covid is Back

By Michael Fine

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Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. But like Freddy Krueger, Covid is back for a midsummer surge. It's worse out west and in England, but what happens there will spread here before long. So here we go again.

You know the drill. Just a cold for most people and almost no risk for anyone under fifty, but some risk of hospitalization and death for people over fifty, worsening with age, and people with severe chronic disease and immunosuppression. You're more likely to get a symptomatic infection if it's been more than six months since your last infection or Covid shot.

And you can reduce the risk of getting infected (and likely make the infection less intense) if you wear a mask when you are among other people, and update your immunization if it's been more than six months since your last shot or infection.

Why does this keep happening? Three major reasons. First, the virus evolves pretty quickly, so it's always morphing and changing and evolving new ways to infect us. Second, immunity fades and fades pretty quickly to this particular virus. And finally, Covid-19 spreads easily because there are so many of us now, living so closely together and traveling all the time, so spreading this and many other viruses as we do so. If you lived on a desert island, you wouldn't get viruses (and wouldn't be immune, so you'd be susceptible to everything.) If the world's population was one or two billion, there just wouldn't be as many opportunities for the virus to spread and evolve. In some ways, Covid-19 is a marker, suggesting that there are risks to how we live now, not that any of us can change that.

But to some degree, our ability to know what the virus is spreading and tell people about that is also an artifact of the state of our science, and I'm not sure if what we know isn't a little too much information at the end of the day. Once upon a time, when people got sick, we would have said that there's a cold going around, because we didn't have a way of

knowing which virus caused the cold. We wouldn't have seen the people getting hospitalized and dying from the virus causing the cold, because we just didn't know which virus was which, so we lumped most of those hospitalizations and deaths into the diagnosis of adult respiratory distress syndrome. But some elder people and some people with chronic disease got hospitalized and died just the same.

Are we better off now? I don't know. We have better treatment for people who get sick from viruses. And I'd bet fewer people who get seriously ill die. On the other hand, because there are so many more of us, I bet viruses spread more than they used to.

All that said, the politics and the arguing about Covid haven't gone away. That's why you aren't hearing about the spread of Covid from public health folks much. Because they are all too scared of stirring up memories of Covid and the partisan battles it created.

And we are still a set-up for the next viral pandemic, which is out there brewing in the great genetic soup of all viruses.

So mask up now and for the next eight weeks if you think you are vulnerable. Get a shot soon if you need one. And stay home and test please, if you get sick.

And let's *please* talk to one another about public health and about how to prevent illness and death from infectious disease. So what ought to be calm conversations between people trying to be one people don't turn into crazy partisan brawls.

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